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## ABSTRACT

Middle school curriculum development in the Netherlands is following two divergent paths, and the central government should bring about unification. This paper describes change in administrative dominance of curriculum and management of curriculum programs since 1975, analyzes outcomes, and recommends unification. After program initiation, individual schools received support from the Curriculum Development Foundation and the educational establishment. Government and local community involvement remained minimal. The government, directing the foundation to extend the experiment on a national scale, brought a shift from the school level to a national level. In 1983, a second path taken by the government involved recommendations for middle school students. Although the government initiated both paths, in theory it is only marginally concerned with the educational content. The first approach, involving schools, the foundation, and education organizations, draws topics from society into the school. The second approach, which mobilizes the community, inclines toward academic and traditional subjects. Primarily, plans have been discussed rather than changes made in content. The government should unify the two lines of development by establishing parameters in which the foundation would resume its main role and by incorporating practical application of academic subjects. (CJH)

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Government policy and the framework of a core curriculum for  
junior secondary education

Introduction

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As you have heard from Mr Labordus, the last ten years or so have seen much debate and deliberation in the Netherlands about the content and structure of junior secondary education. Some progress has been made but there has been much hesitation along the way too. The role of central government in this process has not been inconsiderable. Mr van Bruggen has already spoken about central government's part in education in general in the Netherlands. I, myself, unlike the other speakers here, work for the Ministry of Education and Science as project director for innovation in junior secondary education. The opinions I express today, however, are delivered in a personal capacity and do not represent the view of the Netherlands Government.

I would like to speak firstly about the part played by various groups in bringing about changes in the curriculum for 12 to 15 year olds in the Netherlands, followed by a few observations about the process which has been taking place over the last ten years. Finally, I will put forward a few proposals for the future.

1. Two paths

The Netherlands Government is at present pursuing two separate paths towards developing a new curriculum for

junior secondary education. The first involves schools themselves, the Curriculum Development Foundation (SLO) and the educational establishment in general and began in 1975 when the government allowed a limited number of schools to experiment with comprehensive secondary education on the basis of four very general principles. Three stages can be distinguished along this path.

a. To begin with, the individual schools involved in the experiment received support from the SLO in developing curricula for individual schools and groups of schools for comprehensive secondary education. Government involvement was limited to establishing the four general principles after discussion with parliament. The central protagonists in this first stage were the individual schools and the SLO in its capacity as coordinator of educational support services. Neither the school boards, teachers' or parents' associations nor any other organisations or interest groups within the community were involved, apart from the very minor role played by the education organisations insofar as they were represented on the Board of Trustees or the Executive Committee of the SLO.

b. The second stage came into being when the SLO was directed by the government no longer to confine its help solely to the original group of schools taking part in the experiment but to shift the emphasis to a national experimental curriculum based on practical developments in the experimental schools and elsewhere which could be

introduced on a broad scale and which would create a better insight into comprehensive education and facilitate decision-making. This represented a broadening of policy on two counts: firstly, other secondary schools were now involved as well as the experimental middle schools; secondly, the SLO was asked to produce a national curriculum and to set aside its role of supporting schools on an individual basis.

The protagonists remained the same but the roles had been reversed. The leading part was no longer reserved for the individual school with back-up being provided by the SLO. Instead, the schools were now contributing to the formulation of a national curriculum to be drawn up by the SLO.

It was already becoming clear at the start of the second stage that experimentation alone was an inadequate basis for developing a national curriculum.

- c. The third stage began in 1981 with the formation of a new cabinet intent on giving a fresh impetus to comprehensive junior secondary education. With great alacrity - made possible by the previous two stages - a policy document on comprehensive education for 12 to 15 year olds was published which included a curriculum framework. The document was discussed with education organisations over a period of 18 months. The conclusions reached by the government were translated into an experimental bill incorporating a detailed

curriculum framework and a timetable. The schools and the SLO remained in the wings during this time. The stage had been taken over by the government and education organisations. The SLO was asked to identify elements of the curriculum within the parameters set by the government and education organisations and to develop from these operational and examinable objectives.

In diagram form:

| Instrument         | Principal protagonists   | Method                                                    |
|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| school experiments | schools<br><br>(the SLO) | assistance to individual schools<br>(national curriculum) |
| policy document    | education organisations  | consultation and debate                                   |

This path has resulted in the formulation of a secondary education development bill containing a relatively detailed curriculum. The bill has been submitted to the parliament and is waiting to be discussed in parliament although there is some hesitation to do so.

#### The Advisory Council on Government Policy (WRR)

A second, quite separate path was taken by central government virtually parallel to the last stage of this first path. In 1983 the government requested the Advisory Council on Government Policy, the WRR, to produce

recommendations on the content, duration and structure of basic education, particularly for the 12 to 15 year old age group.

The WRR advises the government on all manner of topics. Its five latest reports, for example, have dealt with such divergent subjects as the social security system, media policy, relations between the Netherlands and the Federal Republic of Germany, welfare policy and employment. In other words, it is not primarily an advisory body on education matters.

The government's reason for turning to the WRR was twofold. Firstly, the question of what schoolchildren should be taught is a social question which should be answered in the first instance from outside the sphere of education. "Society" indicates certain requirements which are then elaborated upon and translated into a curriculum; minor changes may then be made depending on the feasibility of certain demands. Secondly, there were serious doubts as to whether the first path taken would produce results. The highly polarised debate was dominated by problems regarding the structure of comprehensive education and possible solutions. It is hoped that bottlenecks and the polarisation of opinions can be overcome by focusing on the content of the curriculum in the first few years of secondary education.

The government has attached considerable value to these recommendations from the outset, even on first asking the

WRR to look into the matter. The report was completed some months ago. The government's response to the report was both positive and active, and it encouraged positive publicity for the report. A major conference on the report was held two weeks ago. It was attended by representatives of the education field and various groups and organisations including employers' associations, trade unions, the Youth Policy Council and the Equal Rights Council. The speakers included the Minister of Education and Science and the Prime Minister who both expressed very positive views on the report.

In diagram form:

| Instrument      | Principal Protagonists         | Method             |
|-----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| recommendations | society and the academic world | positive publicity |

Both paths taken by the government have now yielded fruit. It seems as if the government has bet on two horses at once without realising they would be running in the same race.

Ladies and gentlemen, the debate about middle schools in the Netherlands has gradually become so complex that only a small circle of experts can still claim to be able to follow all the threads. I am fully aware how much I am asking of you, no matter how much I have simplified this brief account and omitted facts which were not of direct relevance to the present issue.

I would now like to make a number of observations about the process I have described.

## 2. Observations

There are four points I would like to make.

### 2.1 Government

The cardinal point is that government plays a singularly central role. Although it does not in fact appear on my diagram, central government is the initiator of both the paths I have described and, through its intervention, is responsible for initiating the various stages along the first. This is all the more remarkable given that in theory central government in the Netherlands is only marginally concerned with the content of education. In practice however this is not the case. The government dictates numerous aspects of education: it specifies the subjects to be taught, designates examination subjects, draws up examination syllabuses and prescribes how much time is to be allocated to different subjects. Such attempts as it does make to limit its role succeed only with great difficulty, if at all, as teachers and teachers' organisations in particular are strongly in favour of instructions being issued by a central authority.

If we turn to the roles of the various protagonists - roles conferred by the government - we detect certain trends in their relationships to one another. I personally would describe the government as being susceptible to the

pressures of popular trends. The first stage of path one testifies to a naively optimistic grass-roots philosophy. We then see a shift to consensus-through-consultation - at which stage, incidentally, the "education" government manifests itself as no less a part of the educational establishment - and finally a government which, having heard all sides, now adopts a no-nonsense attitude and seeks to take decisions quickly on the basis of the WRR report. The latter step coincides with a tendency to withdraw, to reduce consultation and to take on fewer commitments in connection, too, with the economic crisis.

## 2.2 Differences in the outcome of the two approaches

Have the two paths led to such very different outcomes? First and foremost one is aware of the similarities. What strikes me about the differences that do exist is that the first approach - involving schools, the SLO and education organisations - draws topics, such as health education and caring for people, animals and plants, from society into the school, while the second approach, which sets out to mobilise the community, paradoxically inclines more towards academic and traditional school subjects, a back-to-basics approach. The WRR is in effect telling education to stick to its own job.

## 2.3 Changing roles

During the past few years, all the partners have played changing roles, of greater or lesser importance. It is not

clear what the "proper" roles of the various groups are, if such a thing in fact exists.

The SLO, for instance, occupied a leading role for some time but now inclines to the position of a technical planning and development agency. If the education organisations had succeeded in reaching an agreement with the government, the main lines of the content of junior secondary education would have been established de facto in the negotiation process and would subsequently have been passed by parliament. As this was not the case, however, another protagonist, the WRR, has taken centre stage.

#### 2.4 Nothing but documents

What actually happens in schools and in the classroom, however, has been left in the sidelines and not only in my paper. In effect we have done nothing but discuss plans, documents and reports and have failed to talk about changes in organisation and content within the school. Curricula which lack the backing of teaching materials and guidelines for teachers simply cannot achieve these changes.

### 3. Conclusions

I would now like to make a few concluding statements.

3.1 Firstly, the government should unify the two lines of development. In my opinion this should be done by establishing parameters as quickly as possible on the basis of the WRR report, which will then have to be more narrowly defined with the aid of the first line, in which the SLO

will assume a dominant role. A great deal of the preparatory work for this has already been done.

3.2 An acceptable balance can be established between the primarily society-oriented first line and the more academic second line. I am thinking here of the following:

- a. Besides abstract basic structures, academic subjects should incorporate elements which allow the subject to be applied in a practical way and which enable pupils to interpret their environment.
- b. With the aid of the education infrastructure schools might develop extracurricular activities such as sport, road safety projects, cookery or health education courses. Such activities should be financed by sources other than the Ministry of Education and Science.

3.3 Central government should, for one last time, take advantage of the position assigned to it to take decisions on the broad outlines of curricula. It should then retire gracefully to the wings. The justification for its assumption of a central, decision-making role in this final instance is threefold:

- all the parties - schools, organisations, the academic world and the community - have made their views known;
- the system should now undergo a certain revision, which only central government can do;
- because government has been occupying a central role, no one is in a position at present to assume a

decision-making role, either individually or in conjunction with others.

There are two ways of ensuring continued decision-making:

- a. An organisation such as the SLO could be given a greater measure of authority. Besides being an institute of technicians, the SLO could then also play a role in formulating the wishes and requirements of society, on condition however that its staff and procedures are drawn from and operate outside the field of education and mobilise other groups within the community.
- b. The alternative would be for the SLO to remain a primarily technical organisation. In that case the government would need to find a driving force in some other guise. In its role as technician, the SLO is more likely to meet with acceptance of its part in supervising the development of teaching materials and teachers' guidelines, thus greatly enhancing its innovative function.

Thank you.

| Instrument                  | Principal protagonists            | Method                                                       | Trend                   |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| school experiments          | schools<br>the SLO                | assistance to individual<br>schools<br>(national curriculum) | grass-roots<br>approach |
| policy document             | education organisations           | consultation and debate                                      | consensus               |
| external<br>recommendations | society and the academic<br>world | publicity                                                    | no-nonsense             |

Questions

1. Are the two approaches to curriculum development discernible in your own situation, namely:
  - from within the educational establishment itself?
  - through organisations and groups within the community?
2. What might account for the paradoxical fact that the WRR report tends towards academic, traditional school subjects while the first approach in fact allots society-oriented subjects to schools?
3. What do you feel should be the government's role in this?